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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 COLOMBO 001981

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SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: BIOGRAPHIC INFORMATION ON PRESIDENT
MAHINDA RAJAPAKSE

REF: A. COLOMBO 1853

1B. COLOMBO 1975

Classified By: AMB. JEFFREY J. LUNSTEAD. REASON: 1.4 (B,D).

MEET THE NEW BOSS

11. (SBU) Percy Mahendra (aka "Mahinda") Rajapakse was sworn in as Sri Lanka's fifth President on November 18, 2005--his 60th birthday. Like his predecessor and rival Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, Rajapakse has the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) in his blood, with his father, D.A. Rajapakse, joining Chandrika's father S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike to form the SLFP in 1951, and an uncle serving as a Cabinet Minister in the 1970 government of Sirimavo Bandaranaike, Chandrika's mother. With his sterling SLFP credentials and with a brother and cousin also involved in politics--and with three young sons possibly contemplating political careers as well--Rajapakse is widely considered to represent the only real challenge to the Bandaranaike family's dynastic grip on the party. The left-of-center economic policies endorsed in his campaign manifesto, as well as the quasi-nationalist sentiment in his anti-federalist stand on the peace process (Ref A), may reflect a conscious effort by Rajapakse to move the party away from the centrist positions espoused by Kumaratunga over her 11 years as president and back toward its original Sinhalese socialist roots. Rajapakse has a reputation for astutely outflanking domestic political rivals--his longevity within the corrosively internecine SLFP bears indirect testimony to this talent--but his experience on the international stage is limited. Although clearly indebted to the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) for his narrow victory at the November 17 presidential polls, Rajapakse will likely try to limit the former Marxists' influence in his administration. How successful he is in doing so will be one of the most important tests of his legendary political savvy.

SOUTHERN STRENGTH:
ALL POLITICS IS LOCAL

12. (SBU) Hailing from a politically prominent family from the southeastern district of Hambantota, Rajapakse is the first Sri Lankan president not from Colombo or its environs. (Late President Ranasinghe Premadasa's family is from the south, but he himself grew up in and was elected from Colombo.) Rajapakse identifies strongly with his rural southern Buddhist base (which, incidentally, is the same base eyed by the JVP), even though his family's wealth, education and political prominence obviously distinguish him from the typical Sinhalese farmer. With southern Sinhalese voters, the admiration appears to be mutual; Rajapakse won handy majorities in the six southern districts of Kalutara, Galle, Ratnapura, Moneragala, Kurunegala, Hambantota and Matara.

JUST A COUNTRY LAWYER

13. (U) Percy Mahinda Rajapakse was born on November 18, 1945 in Verukatiya, Hambantota District, the third of SLFP founder-member D.A. Rajapakse's eight children. (An older brother Chamal is also an SLFP MP, while two younger brothers, Godabhaya and Basil, had been living in the U.S. but returned to help with their brother's campaign for the presidency.) He was educated at Richmond College in the southern district of Galle (where his father reportedly had to engage a Sinhala tutor to boost his son's proficiency in his native tongue), as well as Nalanda College and Thurstan College in Colombo. He did not complete his Advanced Level ("A levels") education, instead leaving his job as a clerk at the library at Sri Jayawarendapura University in the Colombo suburbs in 1970 to run for his late father's seat representing his native Hambantota in Parliament. When he won at the age of 24, he became the youngest MP in Sri Lanka's history to enter Parliament--a record that still

stands. Taking advantage of a decision by the then-Justice Minister to allow MPs to enter law school--whether or not they had the necessary educational qualifications--Rajapakse graduated from Sri Lanka Law College in 1974.

DEFENDER OF JVP MISSING

14. (C) Rajapakse lost his seat, along with many of his SLFP colleagues, in his party's landslide defeat in the general elections of 1977. He then turned to the practice of law in Colombo and the south, where his defense of suspected JVP sympathizers first earned him a reputation as a human rights activist. He frequently contacted the Embassy in the 1988-89 period to complain of disappearances and extra-judicial killings under the then-United National Party (UNP) government, and with fellow southerner and Minister of Ports in the Kumaratunga administration Mangala Samaraweera, Rajapakse formed a human rights organization in 1988, called the Mothers' Front, to advocate on behalf of family members of "disappeared" JVP suspects. After he returned to Parliament in 1989 (a memcon in Embassy files quotes Rajapakse as freely admitting to ballot stuffing during that race--but only to balance out just-as-vigorous ballot stuffing by his local UNP rival), Rajapakse served as Secretary to the Committee of Parliamentarians for

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Fundamental and Human Rights and as Director to the Center for Human Rights and Legal Aid. His standing as one of the few such lawyers in the south who continued to operate throughout the height of the violent JVP insurgency--despite threats of reprisal from both right- and left-wing extremists--made him a valuable source for our human rights reporting.

PRO-LABOR MINISTER;
PLACE-HOLDING PM

15. (C) When Chandrika Kumaratunga was elected President in 1994, she named Rajapakse as Minister of Labor and Vocational Training. Rajapakse's fervent pro-union sympathies did not win him many friends in the business sector (he still doesn't seem to have many; the Sri Lankan stock market has dropped by 15 percent since the November 17 election). As Minister, Rajapakse pushed unsuccessfully for the establishment of labor unions in Sri Lanka's free trade zones, and his personal pet project--a workers' charter that provided almost no safeguards for management in the face of union agitation--was soundly defeated in Parliament. Following this fiasco, Kumaratunga moved Rajapakse from the investment-sensitive labor portfolio to the less controversial post of Fisheries Minister in 1998. When the SLFP lost control of Parliament in the 2001 general election, Rajapakse became Leader of the Opposition 2002-April 2004, returning to head Kumaratunga's Cabinet in 2004 as Prime Minister. The JVP, which as a member of Kumaratunga's United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) helped the SLFP clinch the 2004 polls, bitterly opposed Rajapakse's appointment as Prime Minister, pushing instead for the late Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar. Kumaratunga ignored the JVP's importuning for several reasons, including a desire to keep JVP influence out of the high-visibility post and a wish to insulate Rajapakse, whom she clearly and rightly viewed as a political rival, from real power by ensconcing him in the premiership, a position large on ceremony and small on substance.

ALLIED WITH ANURA;
SUSPECTED BY SISTER

16. (C) Until recently, Rajapakse had been considered one of the closest friends and allies of Anura Bandaranaike, the brother of former President Kumaratunga. (Anura was Rajapakse's best man at his wedding.) When Anura briefly made an end run at his mother's leadership of the SLFP in 1981, Rajapakse joined him--and has reportedly been on Chandrika's wrong side ever since. When Anura left the SLFP in late 1993 after his mother anointed his sister as the party's presidential candidate, many of his closest friends--Rajapakse included--were watched suspiciously by the victorious Chandrika faction. The association did not hobble Rajapakse's electoral prospects, however, thanks to the solid and consistent support of his home constituency. Of the 20-odd SLFP MPs tagged as "friends of Anura," Rajapakse was the only one to make it back into Parliament as an SLFP MP in the 1994 elections. That he won a substantive portfolio like Labor from Kumaratunga--despite their earlier personal clashes--proves his tenacity as a political survivor.

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

17. (C) Rajapakse prides himself on having founded the Sri Lanka Committee for Solidarity with Palestine in the mid-1970s, a post which led to a meeting with the late Yasir Arafat at least once when Rajapakse traveled to Tunis, at Arafat's invitation, in the mid-1980s. (Comment: Insiders in Rajapakse's campaign for the presidency credit his pro-Palestinian credentials for his comparatively good showing among Muslim voters. We think any support he gained among some Muslims is more likely the result of internal divisions within the community than to any personal or ideological loyalty to Rajapakse.) Rajapakse spearheaded the fight to close the Israeli Interests section in the 1980s. The Israeli Ambassador to Sri Lanka (resident in New Delhi) has told us he had a cordial meeting with Rajapakse several months ago.

18. (C) Rajapakse led several demonstrations against allied involvement in the Gulf War in 1991. (We do not, however, have reports of similar protests against our current involvement in Iraq.) He told emboffs at the time that his anti-war activities stemmed more from solidarity with the Palestinians than from hostility to the U.S., noting that "we politicians must do certain things" to get elected. (Note: He said much the same thing to the Ambassador last month about his unexpected alliance with the JVP in the presidential campaign.) He has given no indication of anti-American sentiment, has often expressed gratitude for U.S. tsunami assistance and for our hard line against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), and traveled to the U.S. on an International Visitors Program in 1989. Other foreign countries he has visited include the UK, China, Germany and the former Czechoslovakia, where he apparently received a diploma in Trade Unionism from Prague's Trade Union School in 1978.

FAMILY AND PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS

19. (C) Rajapakse and his wife Shiranthi (a former Miss Sri Lanka) have three sons (Namal, Yoshitha, and Rohitha). A daughter died in 1983. The eldest son, who is about 20 years old, graduated from St. Thomas, a prestigious private Christian school in a Colombo suburb, during the last year and is rumored to be contemplating further studies in the UK. Rajapakse and his sons are Buddhists; Shiranthi was raised a Roman Catholic. The new President's English comprehension is good to fair; at times he struggles with spoken English. Rajapakse is expected to ask his two younger brothers Basil and Godabhaya, who left the U.S. to assist in their older brother's presidential campaign, to stay on in some capacity as advisors. (There are rumors that Godabhaya, a former Sri Lanka Army officer, may be tipped as Secretary to the Defense Ministry.) In the run-up to the election, Rajapakse was accused of diverting tsunami aid. He denied the charge and, given the partisan hysteria surrounding all issues in the campaign, it is not clear what the facts are.

110. (C) Our discussions with Rajapakse during his term as Prime Minister revealed an affable, pleasant and obliging interlocutor who seldom had anything of real substance to say. Kept out of "hard" issues like the peace process and tsunami reconstruction by his jealous President, Rajapakse

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freely admitted to us and the visitors we brought to meet him that he had only limited knowledge of these issues--and no wish to run afoul of Kumaratunga by wandering out of his depth. (We recall one particularly awkward meeting in the early days after the December tsunami when the Prime Minister, despite hailing from one of the worst-hit districts, could say little of substance about the situation on the ground.) Rajapakse relatives and some of his political colleagues have commented to us on his aversion to taking controversial (and sometimes, even non-controversial) stands before his nomination, sometimes lamenting that the southerner would say anything to get elected.

111. (C) As noted Ref A, the lack of a "paper trail" documenting Rajapakse's pre-nomination convictions on a variety of issues (the peace process, the economy, foreign relations) makes predicting his performance as President difficult. As PM, Rajapakse viewed himself as treading a fine line between two opposing forces: a hyper-suspicious President who saw him as a threat to her dynastic political ambitions and an equally suspicious JVP alliance partner, which saw him as a potential threat to its own empire-building aspirations. His comments to us during many of our meetings often reflected his frustration and resentment at being boxed into a high-profile but politically insignificant sinecure by these competing political forces.

His triumph as the SLFP presidential candidate in a difficult race testifies to his consummate skill as a political juggler under these challenging circumstances. Having survived this test, the next question, of course, is how long he can keep these various--and potentially volatile--balls up in the air once he is on the national stage.

LUNSTEAD